The Therapeutic

This is the second in a series. Please see Parts One, Three, and Four.

by Albert Norton, Jr. (October 2023)

The Wave, Pamela Colman Smith, 1903

In *The Discovered Self* that appeared here last month, I described a postmodern way of thinking about the world. The discovered self is one given over to the therapeutic. In this post and several that will follow, I attempt to explain "the therapeutic," the cultural habitat for "psychological man."

Nigerian feminist author Chimamanda Adichie wrote:

> *In certain young people today … I notice what I find*

> *increasingly troubling: a cold-blooded grasping, a hunger to take and take and take but never give; a massive sense of entitlement; an inability to show gratitude; an ease with dishonesty and pretension and selfishness that is couched in the language of self-care; an expectation always to be helped and rewarded no matter whether deserving or not; language that is slick and sleek but with little emotional intelligence; an astonishing level of self-absorption; an unrealistic expectation of puritanism from others; an over-inflated sense of ability, or of talent where there is any at all; an inability to apologize, truly and fully, without justifications; a passionate performance of virtue that is well executed in the public space of [social media] but not in the intimate space of friendship.*
>
> *I find it obscene.*

You've probably met the person she describes. She wrote of "certain young people," but this combination of awful traits is not limited to young people. Because the way of thinking that produces this kind of person has become so much more prevalent in recent years, however, it may be more obvious in a younger demographic. Those traits are the opposite of maturity, and indicate a complete buy-in to "the therapeutic."

A key theme here is that the therapeutic produces an unhealthy self-obsession that morally incapacitates those infected with it. Before developing this theme, however, we should get our terms straight. I'm using the phrase "the therapeutic," but you probably want to ask "therapeutic *what*?" "Therapeutic" is normally an adjective. But I'm using this phrase with the noun implied because it comes from the title of a book by Philip Reiff published in 1966: *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, subtitled *Uses of Faith After Freud*. "The therapeutic" has since come into common use to describe the phenomenon we examine here. If you're a grammar nerd, just add a noun in

your head. Make it something like “therapeutic mindset,” or “therapeutic worldview.” I’ll use “the therapeutic” and other variants in this essay. It’s meant to summarize in a phrase a particular way of interacting with the world.

There are other handles we could attach to this way of thinking. Reiff also wrote of “psychological man,” to mean someone strongly affected with the therapeutic. These phrases imply that the mindset has become pervasive, and constitutes a totalizing worldview like religion, or the rigid materialism of the New Atheists, or the postmodern impulse toward an oceanic feeling of collectivism. Carl Trueman, in his 2021 *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, used the phrase “expressive individualism,” which he borrowed from Charles Taylor’s 2007 *A Secular Age*. I’ll avoid “expressive individualism” because our concern is with an extreme subjectivism insufficiently tempered by objective principle. We’re not just contrasting individualistic and collectivist perspectives.

In recent years there’s been much commentary on the consequences of the loss of faith, and on the rise of a cult of victimhood, and “snowflake” emotional vulnerability to opposing points of view, and on “identity” as emergent from the inner being. Such commentary hits all around the strange developments in our way of interacting with the world, but each typically generates understanding only in part, like with the proverbial blind men trying to understand an elephant. The shift to the therapeutic is a key to understanding how these puzzling developments are symptoms of the same disease.

During the postmodern era, which I define as roughly the century-plus since the turn of the 20th century, there has been a profound shift in thinking. Objective, propositional truth as the basis for rationality had previously predominated, as a legacy of Enlightenment thinking. This way of thinking is held up, we might say, by the transcendent. If there is a God who

created all that we know, then the logos that permeates our reality is authored by Him.

Modern thinkers before the postmodern era were concerned with the consequences of rejection of God in an increasingly secularized culture. Once transcendence is rejected, what holds up an objective and universal moral order? If there is no God we're at a loss to explain the rationality of the human mind and of the natural world. We struggle to explain the hierarchy of values that inhere in the conscience and that are reflected in the culture. Where does mankind's knowledge of good and evil come from, if not from that first rebellion against God's decrees?

Postmodern thinkers have tried to place production of truth, falsity, good, and evil in processes of humanistic thinking rather than transcendent Source. We can think of this as a shift from the vertical to the horizontal. I used mountain and river in a similar way in my book *The Mountain and the River* (NER Press 2023), subtitled *Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine*. The purpose was to identify the horizontal in postmodern "process philosophy," in order to contrast the vertical objectivity of values which preceded it.

This was primarily an undertaking of propositions, however. That is, in the evolution of ideas through history, certain propositions replace others, and we can say larger abstractions like "postmodernism" rest on identifiable and more specific propositions like those comprising atheism, existentialism, pragmatism, and a dubious form of "democracy." This propositional thinking brings into focus the ideas we absorb from our cultural environment. As propositions they can be evaluated entirely in a rationalistic way.

But there is another dimension, one that is not strictly propositional in nature. It may be expressed in thinking that is deeply subjective, and drawn from impulse and emotion, distinct from purely rational mental process. It is allied

with a religious impulse—not its doctrines, but its call to our inner yearning. We might call this the emotional dimension, the realm of pure feeling. It is the agitation in the human breast that stirs passion, anger, fear, sadness, and the lightness of heart we call happiness. This dimension of thought proceeds from the inner self without rigidly algorithmic rationality.

We should pause to recognize, however, that emotions are ineluctable from ideas; and ideas from facts. Before the advent of psychological man, we placed feelings in service to ideas. This is the premise of the virtue of self-control, for example. What is it we're to control? Our impulses. Emotions drive impulses. We learn not to reflexively lash out in anger, for example, but instead control that emotion and use our intellect to reason through how best to handle the angering situation. And the criteria we employ to determine "how best" are ideals; the hierarchy of values we absorb in our training-up as human beings. Those ideals are higher principles. Universals that apply to all of us. The external moral framework to which we learn to aspire.

Self-control is necessary to any exercise of empathy. Empathy is the ability to imagine one's self in another's shoes. That requires considering their feelings, not just one's own. This is a result of subordinating feelings to rational thought. This can be reversed, however. Although feelings are connected to facts, feelings as feelings alone can be cherished and nourished and protected and defended and prioritized in a way that subordinates facts and reason. Thoughts are then formed by the feelings. This yields a debilitating way of encountering the world, in which the subjective and irrational interfere with the objective and rational.

Emotions are valid, up to a point. They are an important part of our humanity and we need to acknowledge them in others to fully empathize with them. What can happen, however, is that we can lose the thread of self-control, and consider all our

own emotions to be valid whether they are or not. We can fail to subordinate them to our propositional, rational thinking. This gives emotion priority over rationality; subjectivism over objectivity. This distorts—by the measure of objectivity—our apprehension of what is true and good; false and evil.

Prioritizing emotions means reason takes a back seat, but rationality on subjects other than that which stirred up the emotions may remain untouched. One can be impulse-driven in some ways yet be quite effective at one's job, for example. Or quite intelligent in matters that don't touch on one's emotional susceptibilities.

A consequence to giving priority to the emotions is that they must be dealt with before the events that stirred them up. One's emotional well-being must be kept safe and secure before circumstances are rationally engaged. The primary concern is with one's psychological well-being, therefore. This is "psychological man." You don't want psychological man at the helm in an emergency, because upsetting emotions will divide the mind, or even require a time-out to process.

The therapeutic involves a subjective conviction that processing of feelings comes ahead of correct application of principle, because the goal is a subjective feeling of psychological well-being. This can be characterized as the triumph of the horizontal over the vertical. Internal subjectivism over external hierarchical ideal. What matters is the here and now of my embodied being, not an antiquated hierarchy of principles superior to humanity itself. One's sense of psychological well-being is the measure of success, rather than "doing the right thing." The "right thing" of yesteryear is outmoded, a misguided product of bloodless abstract principle. The thinking of psychological man is directed to (and formed by) the subjective sense of well-being in the embodied self, not disembodied principle residing in a discredited idealized objectivity.

We can readily imagine the result. A person who elevates emotional well-being ahead of values formed in an objective moral hierarchy is prioritizing emotional well-being ahead of every other value. This is not just a matter of elevating internally-derived values ahead of rationally discerned ones. The process by which values are adopted is itself in play. The lens through which one views reality controls the perception of reality. The world looks different to psychological man, compared to the person of faith.

We can understand this by thinking in terms of the opposition of substance and process. Substance is the conclusion one draws. Process is the means by which the conclusion is reached. Psychological man places process ahead of substance, just as in the world of ideas the river inclination is put ahead of the mountain. Emotional evaluation is the process, and so the substance is whatever feels subjectively most satisfying. This is how rational thinking is distorted and subverted by the therapeutic.

For this reason we should not be surprised to encounter the kind of negative character traits recited in the above quote of Adichie. From the inside they make sense, but from the outside looking in on psychological man, the observed characteristics include self-absorption, inflated ego, a sense of entitlement, ingratitude, unselfconscious and reflexive dishonesty, dissembling, virtue-signaling, and the absence of empathy necessary to healthy relationships with others. The tell is that all is "couched in the language of self-care," self-care being the entire point for psychological man, the person given over to the therapeutic.

It is important to grasp this interiority of the therapeutic. It is a paradigm unto itself. Alisdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue* (1984), called it *emotivism*:

> *"the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments* are nothing *but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling … "*

But note MacIntyre was in a sense doing some translating, just as we are here. That is, we are putting into propositional, objective terms a way of thinking that is neither. *Experience* of emotivism is not doctrinal. Just by describing it we attenuate ourselves from experience of it. We have to imagine our way of looking at the world does not involve thinking through a network of values, but rather is the product of the inner, emotion-driven impulses and desires. Resulting thought is directed toward gratification of those impulses and desires. Not purely, of course. For psychological man, the hermeneutical outlook on the world is a complex of emotivism and objectivism, but the latter in service to the former.

The therapeutic rests on the same subjectivity as MacIntyre's "emotivism." It is a platform for evaluating reality that is paradigmatically distinct from observation-based ratiocination according to externally-derived objective principle. MacIntyre observed (as Carl Trueman pointed out) that emotivism is therefore not a theory of meaning, but of *use*, so moral language and concepts are not bandied for their objective meaning, but rather for purposes of stating subjective preferences. Preferences are expressed as truth claims, as if they had objective authority. In this way, one's subjective preferences supplant transcendent, objective authority.

There is no room for God in this worldview. The pre-eminent values are self-care and self-actualization. Radical self-absorption necessarily follows.

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Albert Norton, Jr is an attorney and author. His most recent book is *The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine* (New English Review Press 2023).

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